DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 944 UD 035 689

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TITLE	TANF and the Status of Teen Mothers Under Age 18. Assessing the New Federalism: An Urban Institute Program To Assess Changing Social Policies, Series A.
INSTITUTION	Urban Inst., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, NJ.; Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.
REPORT NO	No-A-62
PUB DATE	2003-06-00
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Urban Institute, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Tel: 202-261-5687; Fax: 202-429-0687; e-mail: pubs@ui.urban.org; Web site: http://www.uipress.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescents; *Early Parenthood; Elementary Secondary Education ; Enrollment Trends; *Mothers; Substance Abuse; *Welfare Reform; Welfare Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Living Arrangements; Risk Taking Behavior; *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

ABSTRACT

This brief uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort to profile teen mothers under welfare reform policies. Initially, it assesses the extent to which teen childbearing among 15- to 17-year-old girls has changed between the start of federal welfare reform in 1997 and 2000. Then, it examines changes in teen mothers' living arrangements, school enrollment, and welfare use over the same period. Finally, using post-reform data, it compares the risk taking behavior of all teenage girls, teen mothers, and teen mothers who live with their parents to see whether living with parents is associated with less risky behavior. Results indicate that minor teen mothers are significantly less likely to receive cash welfare since the implementation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, although there are no statistically significant differences in teen childbearing, residential choice, or school enrollment. Further, teen mothers are more likely to smoke, drink, and use marijuana than other teenage girls. Teen mothers who co-reside with their parents, however, are less likely to use marijuana than teen mothers in other living arrangements. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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ED 476 944

New Federalism
Issues and Options for States

An Urban Institute Program to Assess Changing Social Policies

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

Series A, No. A-62, June 2003

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TANF and the Status of Teen Mothers under Age 18

Gregory Acs and Heather Koball

Minor teen mothers are significantly less likely to receive cash welfare since TANF implementation, but differences in teen childbearing, residential choice, and school enrollment are not statistically significant.

Historically, nearly half of all teenage mothers receive welfare within five years of becoming parents (USGAO 1994). Consequently, 1996's federal welfare reform contains provisions aimed specifically at teen parents and would-be parents with the goals of reducing teen childbearing and preventing teen parents from becoming dependent on welfare. Specifically, to be eligible to receive federal cash aid under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, a minor parent has to live with a responsible adult (generally her parents) and participate in school or training.

Advocates of these provisions argue that by making it harder for teen parents to receive welfare, the policy will reduce teen childbearing. Further, by requiring teens to live with responsible adults (like their parents) and attend school, supporters hope that teen mothers can avoid long-term dependence on welfare. Critics of these provisions argue that single mothers will be denied needed support and forced to live in potentially dangerous households.

This brief uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 cohort (NLSY-97) to profile teen mothers under welfare reform. Initially, we assess the extent to which teen childbearing among 15- to 17-year-old girls has changed between the start of federal welfare reform in 1997 and 2000. Then, we examine changes in teen mothers' living arrangements, school enrollment, and welfare use over the same period. Finally, using post-reform data, we compare the risk-taking behavior of all teenage girls, teen mothers, and teen mothers who live with their parents to see whether living with parents is associated with less risky behavior.

We find that minor teen mothers are significantly less likely to receive cash welfare since the implementation of TANF although there are no statistically significant differences in teen childbearing, residential choice, or school enrollment. Further, teen mothers are more likely to smoke, drink, and use marijuana than other teenage girls. Teen mothers who coreside with their parents, however, are less likely to use marijuana than teen moms in other living arrangements.

Recent Data and Research on Teen Mothers

Much research on teen childbearing includes information on girls through the age of 19. Since the living arrangement and activity provisions of TANF apply to only minor teen parents, this brief focuses on girls age 15 to 17. Figure 1 charts nonmarital birth rates for 15- to 17-year-old girls between 1980 and 1999. During the early and mid-1980s, birth rates for unmarried minors remained fairly stable at just over 20 births for every 1,000 single girls, ages 15 to 17. From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, nonmarital birth rates for minor teens climbed dramatically, reaching 32.0 births per 1,000 in 1994. Since 1994,

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FIGURE 1. Birth Rates for Unmarried Young Women, Age 15–17

Sources: Ventura and Bachrach (2000); Ventura et al. (2001).
Note: Nonmarital birth rates for 1989–93 are somewhat understated because births to unmarried women were substantially underreported in Michigan and Texas.

the rates have declined steadily, falling to 25.5 births per 1,000 in 1999. Despite this recent decline, nonmarital fertility among minor teens is still slightly higher now than it was during the early and mid-1980s.

Welfare policies have long been suspected of affecting fertility decisions, and research on this question is considerable.[1] But most of the research neither focuses on minor teen mothers nor considers the impact of changes in welfare policy during the 1990s on fertility.[2] A significant exception is the work of Kaestner, Korenman, and O'Neill (2003).

Kaestner, Korenman, and O'Neill (2003) use data from the NLSY-79 and the NLSY-97 to compare fertility patterns of girls from the early 1980s, well before the current welfare reform era, with those of girls from the late 1990s, in the post-TANF era.[3] They find that the probability that a teenage girl has had a nonmarital birth by age 17 increased from 3.5 to 5.7 percent between the two cohorts. To identify the potential effects of welfare reform policies on minor teen fertility, the authors first classify certain teenagers as being at high risk for being influenced by welfare policies. The classification is based on their mothers' education and marital status. They find that high-risk girls are more likely to have nonmarital births in the post-TANF period. Finally, they compare the trend in nonmarital fertility among high-risk girls with those of low-risk girls—a difference in difference approach—and find some evidence that the trend toward increased nonmarital fertility among minor teens is even more pronounced among those most likely to be influenced by welfare policy.[4]

This surprising result highlights the difficulty of comparing fertility trends from the early 1980s with those of the late 1990s. As figure 1 illustrates, nonmarital fertility among minor teens is higher in the late 1990s than it was during the mid-1980s; however, during the era of welfare reform from the mid-1990s forward, the nonmarital birth rate for minor teens declined steadily. It is not clear whether welfare policies are responsible for any of these changes.

Once a minor has a child, the assumption inherent in PRWORA legislation is that mother and child would be well served to

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live with responsible adults like the mother's parents. Some evidence supports this belief. For example, Unger and Cooley (1992) find that teen mothers living with their mothers tend to obtain more schooling than other teen mothers. However, other research suggests that living in a three generation household creates more stress and conflict, which could have negative consequences for teen mothers and their children (Kalil et al. 1998).

Focusing on teen mothers in one Michigan county after the implementation of TANF's teen residency and activity requirements, Kalil and Danziger (2000) find that the majority live with their mothers (73.9 percent) and are enrolled in school, have graduated, or have a GED (84.1 percent). Living with their mothers, however, does not protect teen mothers from depression or domestic violence.

This brief enhances our understanding of teen mothers by focusing more narrowly on changes in teen fertility, living arrangements, and activities around the time that TANF policies were being implemented. Further, it examines the risk-taking behaviors of a national sample of teens and teen mothers to obtain a broader picture of the relationships between teen fertility, residential choice, and teen behavior.

Data and Methods

Assessing how minor teen parent residency and activity requirements under TANF have affected teen fertility as well as living arrangements, program participation, and schooling decisions of minor teen mothers requires data on young teenage girls just before and after the implementation of TANF. Further, assessing how living arrangements affect minor teen mothers requires a large nationally representative sample of teen mothers with detailed information on their activities and well-being. Although no single data set is ideal for these analyses, the NLSY-97 may provide the best available information.

The NLSY-97 consists of a nationally representative sample of 8,984 youth who were between the ages of 12 and 16 in December 1996. We draw a sample of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 who were interviewed during round 1a of the NLSY-97. These girls make up the pre-TANF cohort for the analysis. These girls were interviewed between January and September 1997, a period that post-dates the passage of federal reform and spans the implementation of TANF.[5] As such it is an imperfect "pre" cohort; however, since the actions that lead to becoming a teen mother are made 6 to 9 months before the arrival of the child, the use of this cohort is reasonable. For the post-reform cohort, we draw a sample of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 who were interviewed during round 3 of the NLSY-97 (between October 1999 and April 2000). Results are regression-adjusted, and sample weights are used.[6]

Because minor teen childbearing is relatively uncommon in the data, we use another sample from the NLSY-97 to examine how residential choice affects the risk-taking behavior of teen mothers in the post-TANF era. Specifically, we combine the "post" cohort above with information on teenage girls from rounds 1b and 2 of the NLSY-97. If, for example, the same girl appears as a mother in round 2 and round 3, we draw information on her residence and risk-taking behavior from the earlier interview.[7] As before, all results are regression-adjusted to eliminate age-related differences, and sample weights are used.

Findings

Table 1 shows that there are few significant differences in minor teen fertility, living arrangements, and schooling between the pre- and post-reform cohorts, although the apparent trends are consistent with the goals of welfare reform. For example, the probability that a 15- to 17-year-old girl has had a child falls from 3.2 percent to 2.8 percent between the pre- and post-reform periods. These percentages are consistent with teen birth rates from the National Center for Health Statistics—32.1 births per 1,000 15- to 17-year-old girls in 1997 and 27.4 per 1,000 in 2000 (Child Trends 2002).

After climbing dramatically from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, nonmarital birth rates for minor teens declined steadily after 1994, falling to 25.5 births per 1,000 in 1999.

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TABLE 1. Changes in Minor Teen Fertility and the Status of Minor Teen Mothers under TANF

	Pre-reform cohort[a] (%)	Post-reform cohort[b] (%)	Change
15- to 17-year-old girls			
Had child	3.2	2.8	–0.4
Lives with child	2.9	2.5	–0.4
Minor teen mothers			
Lives with parent(s)	64.8	76.0	+11.2
In school or graduate/GED	66.0	62.2	–3.8
Receives AFDC/TANF	25.0	5.0	–20.0*
Receives any public assistance	72.1	78.8	+6.7

Source: Authors' tabulations of the NLSY-97.
Notes: All figures are regression-adjusted for age and weighted. The age distribution for teenage girls is assumed to be 33 percent for each year; for teen mothers, 14 percent are 15, 23 percent are 16, and 63 percent are 17. Regressions available upon request.
a. 15- to 17-year-old girls between January 1997 and September 1997.
b. 15- to 17-year-old girls between October 1999 and April 2000.
* Change is statistically significant at 95%.

Not all minor teens who give birth keep their children. The share of minor teens who reside with their own child fell from 2.9 to 2.5 percent during the reform period, but this change is not statistically significant.

More than three out of every four minor teen mothers who reside with their children live with their own parents in the post-reform period. This represents a notable but not statistically significant increase in the share of minor teen mothers who live with their parents. The share of minor teen mothers who are enrolled in school or have graduated and/or obtained a GED did not change much over the period, remaining above 60 percent.

In contrast to the statistically insignificant changes in minor teen fertility, residential choice, and schooling, the share of minor teen moms receiving welfare (AFDC or TANF) dropped markedly between the pre- and post-reform periods. In late 1999/early 2000, only 5 percent of minor teen mothers received cash welfare, down from 25 percent in 1997. Interestingly, when we consider additional sources of public assistance (food stamps, WIC, and housing), we see that a substantial share of minor teen mothers (almost 80 percent) receives some public assistance and the share has grown (a statistically insignificant amount) between the pre- and post-reform periods.

Taken together, these findings suggest that minor teen residency and activity requirements, specifically, and welfare reform in general did not have statistically significant effects on the fertility decisions of minor teens and the residential choices of minor teen mothers, although the trends are consistent with policy goals. But teen mothers are far less likely to rely on public cash aid in the post-reform era. While this may raise concerns about how these young mothers are faring, many do receive some public assistance and are living in three-generation households with their own parents.

Next we consider how residential choice affects the risk-taking behavior of young teen mothers. We focus on three activities—whether these girls have ever consumed alcohol, smoked tobacco, and used marijuana.[5] The first column in table 2 shows regression-adjusted means for these activities. Among girls age 15 to 17, 43.8 percent have consumed alcohol, 45.3 percent have smoked tobacco, and 20.0 percent have used marijuana. The second column compares minor teen mothers to

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TABLE 2. Risk-Taking Behavior among Minor Teen Mothers

	All 15- to 17-year-old girls (%)	Teen mothers vs. other teens (percentage points)	Teen mothers living with parent(s) vs. elsewhere (percentage points)
Ever:			
Drank alcohol	43.8	+16.2*	–5.6
Smoked tobacco	45.3	+12.1*	+0.3
Used marijuana	20.0	+10.6*	–16.8†

Source: Authors' tabulations of the NLSY-97.
Notes: All figures are regression-adjusted for age and weighted. Regressions available upon request.
† Statistically significant at 90%.
* Statistically significant at 95%.

minor teenage girls without children. Teen mothers are significantly more likely to engage in all three risk-taking behaviors. The probability that a minor teen mother consumed alcohol is 16.2 percentage points higher than that for other teenage girls; the probability that she smoked is 12.1 percentage points higher, and the probability that she used marijuana is 10.6 percentage points higher.

Minor teen mothers who live with their parents are significantly less likely to use marijuana than minor teen mothers in other arrangements. However, those who live with their parents are no less likely to drink or smoke.

Discussion

Childbearing before the age of 18 is relatively uncommon. As such, it is very difficult to obtain a nationally representative sample of teen mothers large enough to detect statistically significant changes in their behavior and ascribe those changes to specific public policies. Nevertheless, prior research demonstrates the dire consequences of nonmarital childbearing among teens. Reducing teen nonmarital childbearing and requiring teen mothers to live in stable environments and be constructively engaged remain policy priorities under welfare reform. Consequently, it is important to garner as much information as possible on how welfare reform policies have affected young teenage girls and minor teen mothers.

Recent trends are encouraging: The birth rate for 15- to 17-year-old girls has fallen by over one-third between 1991 and 2001 (Child Trends 2002). This decline coincides with changes in welfare policies, first under waivers to federal welfare rules in the early 1990s and under federal welfare reform in the late 1990s. However, this brief finds no statistically significant link between the implementation of federal welfare reform and changes in the probability that a 15- to 17-year-old girl has a child.

The specific goals of the residence and activity requirements were to protect the well-being of teen mothers and their children and to reduce the likelihood that they would become dependent on welfare. This brief finds that between the start of federal reform in 1997 and 1999/2000, there has been a notable but not statistically significant rise in the share of minor teen mothers living with their parents but no change in the share in school or with a high school degree/GED. There has been a large drop in the share receiving federal cash assistance through TANF/AFDC. This is a short-term finding: the question remains whether the welfare participation rate of women who had children as minors will be lower in the long run. Further, while their TANF participation is fairly low, the vast majority of minor teen mothers (about 80 percent) do receive some form of public assistance, such as food stamps, WIC vouchers, or housing assistance.

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This brief also examines the risk-taking behavior of teen mothers. Compared with other minor teens, those with children are significantly more likely to drink, smoke, and use marijuana. Among minor teen mothers, those living at home are less likely to use marijuana, but no less likely to report drinking or smoking.

On balance, this brief finds no evidence that, at least in the short term, minor teen mothers were harmed or helped much by residency and activity requirements under TANF or even by welfare reform policies in general. However, policymakers and researchers need to be concerned about the longer term consequences of these policy changes on minor teen mothers. Specifically, will minor teen mothers participate in welfare at lower rates than their predecessors in earlier eras as they age into their 20s? If so, will they fail to obtain training and support services that could improve their earnings potential? What proportion will have nonmarital births in the future? What proportion will marry? And, perhaps most importantly, how will their children fare?

Notes

1. For a thorough review, see Moffitt (1998). Generally, the research shows that welfare generosity does encourage nonmarital fertility but it is difficult to assess the magnitude of the impact. Further, the effects vary by age and race.

2. While they do not consider minor teens, several papers have looked at the impact of welfare reforms (waivers prior to federal reform as well as post-federal reform). The results are decidedly mixed. Findings from welfare reform experiments tend to find either no impact of reforms on fertility or perverse positive effects (see for example, Fein 1999; Kisker, Rangarajan, and Boller 1998; and Quint, Bos, and Polit 1997). Among nonexperimental studies, Kaushal and Kaestner (2001) find no effects of reform on fertility among single mothers, but Offner (2003) finds that the implementation of TANF coincides with a decrease in the share of low-income 14- to 19-year-old girls living with their own children. Horvath-Rose and Peters (2001) and Wallace (2002) find that one specific policy, family caps, reduces fertility. Surprisingly, Horvath-Rose and Peters (2001) find that minor parent provisions are associated with higher nonmarital birth ratios.

3. They also consider changes in other outcomes such as welfare use, marriage, and dropping out of high school.

4. The authors do not obtain this result when they examine fertility through age 19.

5. The NLSY-97 contains a supplemental sample of youth who were interviewed for the first time between March and May 1998. These observations from round 1b are excluded from our "pre" cohort but do appear in round 1 in the NLSY-97.

6. In each cohort, about one-third of the sample should be 15, another third 16, and the final third 17. However, because of the age distribution of the original sample, there are too few 17-year-olds in the "pre" cohort and too few 15-year-olds in the "post" cohort. To address this, all findings are regression-adjusted; regressions are available from the authors upon request. The unweighted sample size for the pre-reform cohort is 1,920 girls, 62 of whom co-reside with their children; the post-reform cohort consists of 2,324 girls, 83 of whom co-reside with their children.

7. The unweighted sample size for this group is 2,299 girls, 161 of whom co-reside with their children.

8. Studies of adolescent risk-taking behavior often include sexual activity; given our focus on teen mothers, we assume that they all have had sex. In addition to risk-taking behavior, we hoped to examine the material well-being of minor teen mothers. Unfortunately, income data are missing for a substantial share of the minor teen mothers in the sample.

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This series is a product of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

The *Assessing the New Federalism* project is currently supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and The Ford Foundation.

This series is dedicated to the memory of Steven D. Gold, who was codirector of *Assessing the New Federalism* until his death in August 1996.

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The authors would like to thank Jennifer Holland for her capable research assistance and Sandra Danziger, Paul Offner, Alan Weil, and Sheila Zedlewski for their helpful comments.

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